

Global Aspirations, National Barriers: Indian Student's Migration in the Age of Policy Flux

Sadananda Sahoo¹ and Abhay Chawla²

Abstract

Motivated by the pursuit of high-quality education, improved career prospects, and upward social mobility, the outflow of Indian students has become a major aspect of global student migration trend. As per India's Ministry of External Affairs, the number of Indian students studying abroad surged to over 1.8 million in 2025, a significant increase from 1.3 million in 2024. These students are dispersed across 241 global destinations, spanning nearly every country worldwide. Both the scale and geographic reach of this migration exceed China's, which has around 1 million students studying overseas. However, the patterns and experiences of this migration are increasingly shaped by shifting global policy regimes-ranging from changing visa regulations and post-study work policies to broader geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties. This paper based on secondary data from various national and UN data sources and content analysis from newspapers tries to explore how evolving policy environments in host countries are influencing Indian student migration, examining the intersection of national interests, global competition and the aspirations of a highly mobile and ambitious youth population.

Keywords: Indian Student Outmigration, Optional Practical Training, Post Work Visa, STEM, Indian Students in Canada, Indian Students in USA

Introduction

In recent years, the movement of Indian students abroad has become a major facet of global student migration, fuelled by the desire for top-tier education, enhanced career prospects, and upward social mobility. Indian students form one of the largest international student communities globally, with key destinations being the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK. International migration in general and student migration in particular is increasingly influenced by evolving global policies, including shifting visa rules, post-study work options, geopolitical tensions, host society acceptability and economic opportunities etc. As nations adjust their immigration and education policies amid political, economic, and environmental challenges, the dynamics of international student mobility are undergoing significant changes. This paper based on secondary data from various national and UN data sources and content analysis from newspapers tries to explore how evolving policy environments in host countries are influencing Indian student migration, examining the intersection of national interests, global competition and the aspirations of a highly mobile and ambitious youth population.

¹ Sadananda Sahoo, Associate Professor, School of Interdisciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University. Email: ssahoo@ignou.ac.in

² Abhay Chawla, Visiting Professor at IP University and IIMC Delhi, India. Email: abhaychawla13@duck.com

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STEM Areas as a pull factor

A significant percentage i.e. 70 % of Indian student migration is in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) areas as per a *Times of India* report (Sharma, 2025). With emerging fields like Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Cybersecurity gaining prominence, countries need to invest more in R&D leading to constant innovation in processes and products. Leading research is still concentrated in developed nations, where universities serve as centres of cutting-edge advancements that turn to become magnets for high aspiration and achieving students. Additionally, many destinations offer high-quality, affordable education within diverse multicultural settings, along with post-study work opportunities. All this makes these countries more attractive to international students than their home countries."

USA leads in the R&D spending with \$784 billion in 2023 followed by China with \$723 billion while smaller nations like Taiwan, Sweden and South Korea spend roughly 4.0%, 3.6% and 5% of their GDP on R&D respectively. India's R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP has remained relatively low consistently around 0.65% in recent years. This figure is significantly lower compared to many nations, leading India to miss out on its demographic dividend. This development is also thereby impacting the aspirant student to search for better destinations for their future career.

Contextualising Student Migration from India

Student out-migration is not a new phenomenon in India though its pattern, destination and characteristics have changed over time.

Initial stage of student migration: This phase is during Colonial Era (Late 19th to Early 20th Century). Outmigration of student from India began during British colonial rule, primarily among elite families. The main destination was the UK, particularly Oxford and Cambridge. Higher education in Britain was viewed as a route to professional advancement and entry into colonial bureaucracy, as well as a means to gain intellectual legitimacy and social status back home. For example, Mahatma Gandhi studied law at University College London, Jawaharlal Nehru attended Harrow, Eton, and later Trinity College, Cambridge, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar studied at Columbia University in New York and later at the London School of Economics, Sarojini Naidu studied at King's College London and Girton College, Cambridge etc.

Post-Independence (1947–1970s): After independence in 1947, India faced severe shortages in higher education infrastructure, particularly in science and technology. The Indian government encouraged international study—especially in the United States, USSR, and UK—for training in engineering, medicine, and science. By the 1960s and 1970s, Indian students began moving in larger numbers to the USA especially for graduate education, supported by fellowships and exchange programs like Fulbright and USAID with many choosing not to return to India.

Liberalization (1990s–2000s): India's market reforms led to greater exposure to global education markets and rising middle-class aspirations. With the growth of private wealth and information technology, students increasingly pursued international degrees to gain a competitive edge. Canada and Australia emerged as major destinations due to more accessible immigration policies and post-study work opportunities and Germany, New Zealand, and



Singapore began attracting Indian students through scholarships and English-language programs. Most students during this era went with their own financing as middle-class families often view foreign degrees as long-term investments.

Massification and Diversification (2010s–Present): Towards 2010s, the scenario further changed. Indian student migration increased further. There were over 350,000 Indian students were studying abroad in 2015 and by 2025, this number had surpassed 1.8 million, making India the largest source of international students, China being the second. The UNESCO data mentioned that international student mobility has significantly increased over the last two decades. From just over 2.2 million international students it grew to about 3.8 million in 2011 with this upward trend continuing over the next decade, reaching to over 6 million by the year 2021. (IOM, n.d)

Historically, international student mobility has shown a gender imbalance, with male students consistently outnumbering their female counterparts. In 2001, female students made up about 45% of the global internationally mobile student population—around 1 million—compared to 1.2 million male students, or 54%. Although the gender gap has gradually decreased over the past two decades, female students still make up a smaller share of the internationally mobile student population. (IOM, n.d)

There are new patterns of student mobility in Asia. Chan (2012) notes that higher education institutes (HEI) from being nationally oriented entities, with improvements in modern technology have become internationalized with this internationalization also referring to besides a number of other things a mobility of students. He goes on to write that many governments have adopted various strategies to foster this internalization which includes recruiting international students.

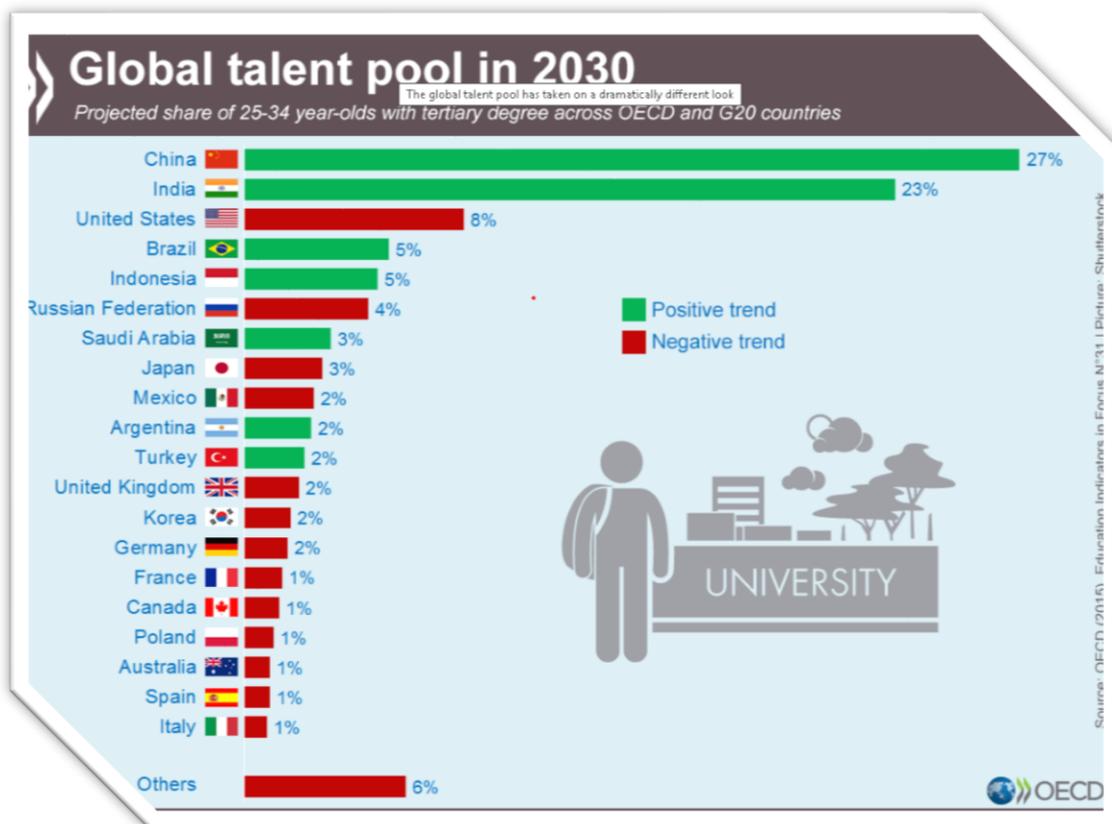
Various researches like the one done by Shank, Quintal and Taylor (2005); Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) and Pimpa (2003) on the causes of student migration found that one of the major factors influencing students to study abroad is family influence. Another research by Bourke (2000) found that the recommendation of the family influences the student to decide the host country and institution. Supposedly the recommendations of family and friends are easily reliable and trusted because they are not profit oriented. He and others also found the cost of universities as the most important factor while taking a decision to study overseas and the selection of a particular university.

While there are many reasons for higher demand of international students, Khadria, (2001) views the first and foremost reason being that greater number of international students mean higher financial resources in the host country and higher funds available for the smooth functioning of the receiving institutions. McMahon (1992) tested a ‘push’ and ‘pull’ model for the outward and inbound flow of international students from eighteen developing countries to developed countries during the 1960s and 1970s. While the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of the developing country in the world economy, the priority placed on education by the government of the developing country and the availability of educational opportunities in the home country lead to a “push”; the relative sizes of the student’s home country economy compared to the host country, economic links between the home and host country, host nation political interests in the home country through foreign assistance or cultural links and host nation support of international students via scholarships or other assistance constituted the “pull” factors.

Global Talent Hunt

This hunt is directly related to student migration. Advanced economies including the US, Europe, Canada, Australia, and the GCC nations rely heavily on cutting-edge technology and a globalized workforce to sustain that economic growth. Within this context, Indian student migration must be analyzed as part of the broader movement of global talent, a defining characteristic of the 21st-century knowledge economy.

The projected talent pool across OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and G20 countries is shown in the chart below with China leading while India is second with both China and India way ahead of USA. In fact the chart also underscores why the western nations need the talent from China and India in the absence of their talent pool.



Source: <https://oecdedutoday.com/the-global-talent-pool-has-taken-on-a-dramatically-different-look/>

In today's competitive landscape, where innovation, research, and technological advancement drive national progress, countries are no longer just competing for trade and investment but also for skilled professionals with international students playing a crucial role in these dynamics.



Behl (2025) writes that the number of Indian students studying abroad has reached a massive 1.8 million in 2025, according to the data released by Ministry of External Affairs and confirmed by various internal education bodies. The largest outflows of students are to Canada followed by USA, UK, Australia and Germany with Packer(2025) adding that with policy turmoil in receiving countries, all four major English-speaking study destinations are now hit as students are increasingly look for other options.

Looming Crisis in the Age of Policy Flux

The current time is very volatile with COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts across regions, domestic challenges etc.

Student migration and conflicts: Events like the Ukraine-Russia war also has had an impact with the student population in Ukraine decreasing from 11,987 to 2,510. Other alternate destinations like Ireland, Uzbekistan and Vietnam are gaining traction reflecting growing preference for destinations with affordable tuition and post-study employment opportunities. Dubai has also emerged as a rising hub with Indian students now making up almost 42 percent of its international student intake, particularly in technology and business programs. (Sareen, 2025)

Among courses of studies being pursued, medical education has emerged as a primary driver of student mobility with East and Central Asian countries figuring among the top 13 host countries. Blinkley and Pathi (2024) write that this historic number of students studying in foreign universities is due to a fast-growing aspirational generation of young people who can't find opportunities in India. They mention about Indian estimates of about 1.5 million students at universities abroad, an eight-fold increase since 2012 with US being the top destination. They go on to write that this trend marks a setback for India, as many students view foreign universities as pathways to careers abroad and a brain drain for India. However, it has been advantageous for American universities, which, facing a decline in record-high enrollments from China, have increasingly looked to Indian students as a key source of full-tuition revenue.

Indian student mobility reflects broader dynamics of skill and talent flows. Nations view international students as a pipeline of future high-skilled migrants. Policies offering **post-study work visas** (e.g. in the US via OPT (now under lens), or the UK's two-year post-study visa) position students as strategic investments, who might stay and contribute to innovation and demographic stability.

Domestic Challenges: At the same time, Indian migration is shaped by domestic challenges. India's higher education system faces significant capacity constraints. With a rapidly growing population, competition for spots at the country's premier universities and institutes has become intense with acceptance rates at some as low as 0.2% which is even lower than those at Harvard University (3%) or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (4%) (Blinkley and Pathi 2024).

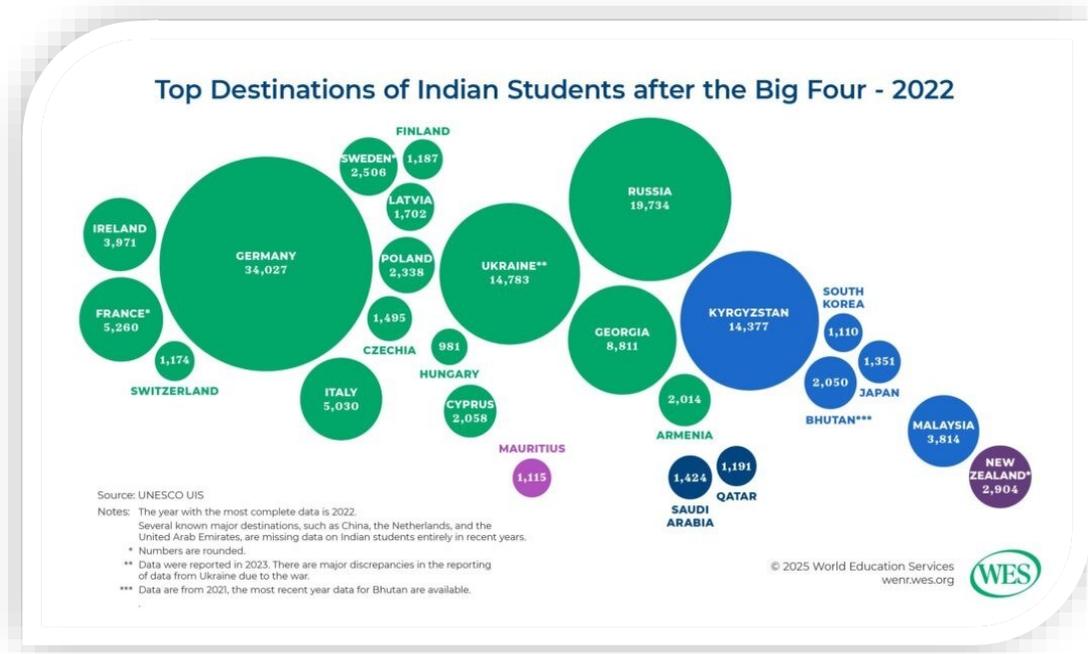
Loo (2025) quoting figures from Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment writes that unemployment rate among higher education graduates stood at around 13.4 % in 2022-23. This in the USA was around 2.3% and 4.2% in Canada in 2023. He adds that ILO finds the unemployment rate at 30%, adding that those with higher educating more likely to be unemployed than those without schooling.

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A joblessness growth in economy (India has been experiencing periods of strong GDP growth, but this growth has not always been accompanied by a similar increase in job creation due to multiple factors) means fewer jobs even for college graduates. Jobs are being created in fields such as construction and agriculture without meeting the demands of a newly educated workforce. There are many opinions regarding the reasons for this state of affairs one of which is the misalignment between higher education and job market as well as the other being quality of higher education. This limited scalable job opportunities at home leads many to migrate with dual aims of educational advancement and a pathway to a career.

In response, many countries now design immigration and education policies specifically to attract and retain these emerging talents, seen as critical to technological innovation, economic growth, and demographic renewal. For example, Blinky and Pathi (2024) write about the chance to work in America under the US government's OPT or optional training program (now under threat) with the majority of Indian students opting to come to the USA for the graduate programs in science, math and engineering fields which have faced persistent shortages of workforce there. Over the years there has been an increase in students in the undergraduate program too along with the graduate programs, all because of a rise of an economically well off and aspirational middle class in India.

As per UNESCO UIS data compiled by World Education Services (WES) below is the visualization of the top destination for Indian students after the big 4 countries.



Source: <https://wenr.wes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/0225-WENR-GEK-India-3-top-destinations-1024x580.jpg>



Political-Economic Dynamics in destination countries

Over the last decade, destination countries' political economies, i.e. balancing economic demand for high-skilled migrants against the domestic backlash and shifting politics have deeply influenced migration regimes. While countries like Canada, the U.S., and the UK once aggressively courted Indian students as economic assets, recent years have seen growing regulatory barriers and visa restrictions in response to social and political pressures. Emerging alternatives like Germany and New Zealand have capitalized on this opening by offering more stable, accessible pathways. Indian students, as key actors in this landscape, remain highly sensitive to both macro-policy signals and lived uncertainties.

Canada: Indian students have been migrating to Canada in large number since the last one decade. Sasi (2025) writes about the increase of Indian students in Canadian universities from 31,920 in 2015 to a staggering 278,160 in 2023. This increase was helped by the “The Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP)” and the broad immigration pathways created by Canada. As per Mishra (2024), quoting Global Affairs Canada (GAC), in 2022 international students added roughly CAD 31 billion (USD 23 billion) to the national GDP which is around 1.2% of the total GDP. Their spending also made up 23% of Canada’s service exports that year with 97% of this economic input coming from long-term international students. The proportion of Indian students was over 40% of Canada’s international student population. He adds that a 2023 report by the *Economic Times of India* highlights that students from the state of Punjab alone contributed nearly USD 8 billion to Canada’s economy.

United States of America: Recorded a high of 331,602 Indian students studying last year which was an increase of 23 per cent from 2023. With this India surpassed China as the leading source of international students in the US for this period (Behl 2025). It is the The OPT (optional practical training) program, which allows STEM graduates to work up to three years post-study that has been essential to retaining Indian talent.

TOI education (2025) state that Indian students accounted for 48% of all STEM-OPT participants which is equivalent to 45,800 engineers, coders, analysts, and scientists powering American companies. It goes on to add that the total Indian share across all OPT categories is about 49,000 to 58,000 students. Estimates suggest that the average Indian student spends \$60k to \$100k on a US STEM degree which vanishes without OPT with NAFSA (Association of International Educators) estimating that international students (led by Indians) contribute \$33 billion to the US economy annually. However, of late the visa restriction and other stringent measures against foreign workers and students caused an abrupt drop in the Indian students.

United Kingdom: Indian students rose from 10,418 in the UK to 119,738 in the period 2015-2023(Sasi,2025). In 2021 UK has reinstated the two-year Graduate Route visa, allowing international graduates to stay and work in the UK for two years after completing a bachelor's or master's degree, or three years after a PhD leading to increase in international students including Indians. Mishra (2024) writes that the economic benefit of international students was estimated at £41.9 billion in 2021/22 up from £31.3 billion in 2018/19. This net contribution even accounted for an estimated £4.4 billion impact on public services.

Australia: Chung (2025) writes that there were 300,000 Indians holding temporary visas in Australia in the September quarter of 2024, up from 200,000 in the same period in 2019. This figure included 115,000 Indians on student visas and 80,000 Indians on graduate visas.

He adds this surge in Indian students is due to an agreement signed in May 2023, the Australia-India Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement, which opened the doors to more Indian students as well as graduates and early-career professionals. The pact meant Indians could apply for five-year student visas, with no limit on the number who can study in Australia, and graduates could apply to work in Australia for up to eight years without visa sponsorship.

Germany: IE Education Desk (2024) quoting the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) reveals that Indians continued to be among the top contributors to Germany's international academic community, with around 49,000 students and 6,700 researchers enrolled at German universities with almost 80 per cent of international researchers in Germany working at universities including around 4,000 professors and around 20 per cent at non-university research institutions. This increase in student population from 2019 to 2023–24 is largely in STEM fields, aided by relaxed language norms and clear immigration routes for skilled talent.

New challenges in the Host countries

Several factors impact the host country policies on immigration in general and student inflow in particular. They include demographic, economic, political and social considerations. The following factors play a decisive role:

Demographic Shifts: Nations with aging populations (e.g., Japan, Germany, Canada) face workforce shortages, making student migration a strategic solution. Such countries often ease transition pathways offering extended post-study work rights and streamlined permanent residency options to retain skilled graduates.

Economic Priorities: For education-exporting nations (e.g., UK, Australia, US), international students represent a critical revenue stream. Many of their universities generate revenue from students coming from outside. There are occasional visa relaxations to attract more students i.e. during post-pandemic recovery.

Geopolitical Alignments: Factors such as bilateral relations also influence student mobility in many countries while diplomatic tensions can trigger restrictions. There are examples of Chinese STEM students or recent time Canada's caps on Indian applicants following political disputes.

Security and Immigration Risks: There are also concerns over visa misuse, espionage, or ideological threats particularly in higher scientific research. Measures are often taken in doing enhanced background checks, restrictions on certain disciplines prone to higher risks, and stricter compliance tracking.

Talent Competition: To lead in innovation, countries actively compete for top-tier students, especially in STEM and technology. Specialized visas (e.g., the US H-1B, UK's Global Talent Visa, fast-tracked processing and industry-linked scholarships reflect this priority.

Domestic Political Climate: Policy volatility often mirrors national sentiment. Right-leaning governments may impose restrictive measures despite the country's economic benefits, while



progressive administrations typically advocate inclusive education-migration linkages. Shifting political power frequently results in abrupt policy reversals.

Brain Gain vs. Brain Drain Dynamics: Countries like Canada and Australia promote policies that turn student migrants into long-term contributors. These policies also align with "brain gain" goals—reversing talent loss by importing skilled youth. Hence a points-based systems rewarding education in the destination country is the outcome(e.g., Canada's Express Entry).

Let's look at above patterns with specific examples from destination countries for Indian students.

Canada: Of late there are new challenges pertaining to Indian students in Canada. Sasi (2025) writes about how politics played a role especially the diplomatic tensions between Canada and India after the killing of a Sikh separatist. Also domestic political and resource pressures led to caps on permits, ending fast-track Student Direct Stream (SDS) and tightened income and eligibility norms in response to housing, health, and public service strains The introduction of the SDS for Indian students simplified and sped up the visa process with SDS offering a 20-day processing time. SDS visa has been discontinued by Canada on November 8, 2024. Livemint (2024) reports about a two-year cap on new international student visas amid housing crisis, significantly affecting Indians. This will mean a 35% reduction in new student visas in 2024. They go on to write that federal government has allowed provinces and territories to decide the number of permits to be distributed among universities and colleges in their jurisdiction with reductions going up to 50% in some regions. With provinces like Ontario and British Columbia prioritizing programs aligned with labor market needs, particularly in healthcare, IT and skilled trades, this changes the skill sets required by students from conventional education. Business Today Desk (2025) also reports of post-study work visa now requiring a language proficiency tests as well as the increase of work hour limit from 20 to 24 hours per week adding to dampener on student flows to Canada.

Restrictive Policies under the new US administration

USA: Business Today Desk writes about the concerns over potential restrictions on Optional Practical Training (OPT) and H-1B visas under the new administration as OPT remains a major allurement for a US degree. TOI Education writes about an over 28 percent drop in Indian enrolment year-on-year (Mar 2024–March 2025) according to SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Program) data, an early warning of potential policy impact. To add to this the recent new order to substantial hike the H-1B fees, enhanced social media security and political shifts have intensified uncertainty and discouraged student inflows. To top this is the Indian rupee's depreciation against the dollar makes studying in the US costly compared to other destinations and out of reach for many.

United Kingdom: New rules in 2024 restricted foreign students from bringing dependents. Sasi (2025) quotes the UK Home Office which reported an "84% drop in dependent visa applications, and overall study visas for Indians fell by 26%". To add to this the hike in tuition

fees and Indian rupee's depreciation against the pound has added to financial strain on potential students making study in UK costly and out of reach for many students.

Australia: Business Today Desk (2025) mention that there are new restrictions in Australia too. The proposal to cap international student intake at 270,000 which still is under review. Besides this, there is now a financial proof requirement of A\$29,710 (about 17lac INR) and a higher English language proficiency standard has been introduced. However, the temporary graduate visa (subclass 485) still offers up to six years of work rights for graduates.

The federal government attempted to slow immigration via ministerial direction 107 aimed at cutting the number of high-risk students entering Australia but following a backlash from the university sector 107 was revoked and replaced with MD111. This direction allows government to process visas for all institutions on an equal basis up to 80 percent of the student cap previously allocated. Once an institution has met its allocation of 80 percent it will move to the back of the queue behind other institutions that have not met their allocations. This effectively will slow down the visa process for students.

Germany: No specific restrictions in place and is generally welcoming talent for competitiveness in their economy. The Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership (MMPA) agreement between India and Germany, signed in December 2022, includes provisions to facilitate mobility for students, including extended residence permits for up to 18 months for professional experience after completing academic or vocational training in Germany.

New Openings: Joshi (2024) writes that France has announced a five-year post-study visa for students pursuing master degree where the number of Indian students currently are 10,000. IE Education Desk (2024) mentions about the following countries with changing visa rules for students: New Zealand has announced that international students who study for a postgraduate diploma for 30 weeks and transfer to a Master's degree immediately afterward are now eligible for a Post Study Work (PSW) visa as well it has introduced fast-tracked visa and residency pathways for Indian students and professionals, positioning itself as more welcoming amid policy tightening elsewhere; The Philippines government in 2024 approved an amendment to the Philippine Medical Act allowing foreign nationals to practice medicine in the island nation and Italy starting January 2025 will schedule individual appointments for fingerprinting in Italian consulates for study visas which fall under Type D category which is a long-term stay visa with the Italian government announcing that Indian students can stay for an additional 12 months after the completion of their degrees.

Conclusion

The student migration is undergoing a complex and contradictory policy regime. While in one hand there is a competition for student migrants due to need for skills and talent. There is also hostility among the social and political spheres. While, demographically transitioning nations like the US and Canada are facing shrinking workforces due to low birth rates and aging populations at the same time, there is also increased hostility towards the foreign students in recent time. On the one hand there is demand for talents and skills in industries to maintain their leadership and competitiveness and on the other there is a restriction on them too to comply the nationalistic demand.



Frequent Policy shifts in the host countries are a challenging task often to Indian students and also the Government to recalibrate new plan. However, the world is undergoing a volatile period where various factors such as conflicts, local politics and other factors impact the migration regime frequently.

Other challenges to student migration includes increasing restriction on part/full time job during and after study, a cap on immigrant intake, volatile situations emerging from local conflicts, political uncertainties and the aftermath of a COVID pandemic. Yet more challenges for the students while in destination countries in terms of Human Rights violations, racism etc. as well as reintegration challenges when they return after completing the course or without finishing due to conflicts and political uncertainty like the Ukraine-Russia War.

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to internationalize Indian campuses and attract foreign universities, the idea to reduce outbound flows if successfully implemented over time. Also it is important to have more dynamic migration governance with focus on integration and rehabilitation in home country with a continuous reskilling for a better global movement of skills and knowledge. To add to the above India needs to bring out policies similar to the ones like China to attract Indian skill and talent and high achieving returnees after they finish their higher education and practical trainings back home.

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